

Steps toward teaching language awareness with literary texts

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Introduction.

In this paper I shall examine some of the ways literary texts can be used in the language classroom to contribute to the greater language awareness of learners and teachers. Mainly because I have my own students in mind, I shall use texts from popular literature (songs, film and television script extracts, jokes and newspaper stories) as examples.

A Rationale for Language Awareness in the Classroom.

A few writers (for example, Bolinger 1980, Fairclough 1989) have analyzed the reasons why it is useful for anyone to have an awareness of how language is used (and abused and manipulated). Others (Fairclough, 1992, James and Garrett, 1991, McCarthy and Carter, 1994, van Lier, 1995) make powerful cases for language teachers (and those of other subjects) to give explicit attention in the classroom to raising their students' awareness.

The essence of these arguments is succinctly put by McCarthy and Carter (1994): "A more reflective language learner is a more effective language learner"(p.165). They also challenge recent thinking among many in the TESOL/TEFL teaching community: "(F) or too long there has been a strong anti-intellectualism associated with communicative language teaching."(p.166). I agree with these sentiments. Much of the work

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I do it as meaning-focused and communicative as possible. I do not believe, however, that consciousness-raising, guiding students to a deeper language awareness or even interpreting through stylistics runs counter to such work. Indeed they are all attempts at helping learners increase their ability to understand the meaning and communicate effectively. Language awareness work and communicative work should be part of the same course.

I find most of my students do not always seem to be “reflective” as learners (perhaps because they have not been encouraged to be), but do usually show an interest in teaching and learning which appeals to their intellect. Language awareness work in the classroom could build on their interest in form to help them towards more reflection and to more effectiveness as learners. As Donmall (1991) says: “Explicit insight into language and language learning informs the teacher and encourages the pupil to foster optimum interaction for foreign language learning.”(p.121). Widdowson (1979 and 1992), argues forcefully for students learning to analyze literary language: he says even a structurally based language course “must somewhere make provision for the teaching of interpretative procedures, since not otherwise will learners be prepared for their encounter with actual discourse”(1979, p.159). He was making the point for studying literary discourse in its most extreme representational form, poetry, but I believe it is also valid for more accessible forms.

2. Songs.

2.1 A Start.

A simple, step by step approach with a simple text can be used to introduce language awareness. Pop songs interest many students and are often more accessible than poems. They are very useful for introducing

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what McCarthy and Carter call “the inferencing principle”(p.167). Even songs with simple words and messages can be used. For example, John Lennon’s *Happy Xmas (War is Over)* does not require a stylistics treatment such as discussed by Widdowson (1992) to interpret the meaning. The song expresses the hope that this Xmas will be a good one for the young and old, weak and strong, rich and poor, black and white, yellow and red, in other words, everybody

After playing the song as a light, listening exercise with a low level class just before the winter holiday, I drew attention to the use of the word *Xmas* in contrast to *Christmas*. I asked and discussed with the students questions such as: a. What does *Christmas* have that *Xmas* does not? c. How many Christians live in Japan? d. From the lyrics, who do you think the song is aimed at? e. So why, do you think, did John Lennon choose to use *Xmas*, rather than *Christmas*? We also mentioned that *Xmas* is often used in decorations or advertising, often just because it is a shorter word. The students enjoyed the song, but I was particularly interested to see how interested the students were in the short discussion that followed.

2.2 A Song and its Inspiration: The Contrastive Principle.

The “contrastive principle”, explained in McCarthy and Carter (p. 166), can be used with texts in several different ways. One way would be to contrast different kinds of story-telling; for example, with a song lyric and the newspaper story which inspired it. The Beatles wrote several of their songs after reading the newspapers. One such song was Lennon and McCartney’s *She’s Leaving Home* (1967) from the Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band album. The lyrics are available on the album cover.

Students can be asked to compare the tenses of the verbs in the texts. The immediate striking feature of the time references is that where the

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stories are told in the third person, which is for the most part, the main verbs in the newspaper story (a reproduction of which is available in Turner (1994)) are in some aspect of the past tense, while those in the song are in the historic present. This tense, particularly a feature of spoken discourse, “brings the listener directly into the action with the teller..”, say McCarthy and Carter (p.95). They continue:

Schiffrin (1981) notes that speakers will often change from the simple form of historical present to continuous aspect to give particular focus to selected actions and events. This sort of super-heightening of attention to stages in the narrative is again an interpersonal as well as textual device, involving the receiver even more directly.(ibid.)

This is what the song does. The first two lines, for example, are: “Wednesday morning at five o’clock as the day begins, Silently closing her bedroom door”. Interestingly, the time references are reversed when the first person is used. Except for one use of the word “has” in a description of the missing girl, the first time the present tense is used in the newspaper is when the girl’s father is quoted directly and is expressing his state of mind at the time of speaking. In contrast, where the song adopts the first person with imagined quotes from the parents, the verbs are in the past tense, such as in “We gave her everything money could buy”.

The lines in the song which give the point of view of the anguished parents are elaborations of the one first person quote in the newspaper story – from the father. In both texts they have the effect of injecting emotion into the story. Students can be asked to see how this is achieved. The newspaper story is about a specific girl with an age and a name and is accompanied by her photograph. The song, on the other hand, tells a story with greater universality by omitting factual details and descriptions

Steps toward teaching language awareness with literary texts of her appearance. Students can be asked to find a reason for her disappearance: The second from last line in the song – “something inside that was always denied for so many years” – has the effect of what Labov (1972) called the evaluation of a narrative; that is, “the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d’être*: why it was told, and what the narrator is getting at.”(p.366).

2.3 A Stylistic Treatment: *The Inferencing Principle*.

Language is played with creatively by poets, song writers and advertising copywriters, among others. Without language awareness the point of the words in adverts, even when they are known individually, is often not clear, as Fairclough (1992) and McCarthy and Carter show (*passim*). Japanese adverts also often play on words so the idea is certainly something students here can relate to. World knowledge, topic schema and culture usually play an important part in helping the reader understand adverts; but so too does a more bottom-up stylistic look at the language. Certainly it does in poems and, to some extent, in songs too.

Guiding students towards developing the ability to arrive at what Widdowson (1992) calls “an interpretation of representational meaning”(p. 26) of literary texts is an enormously useful way for teachers to raise their students’ general language awareness, as well as to analyze particular literary texts. Using the suggestions of Widdowson, Collie and Slater (1987), Yorke (1986), and in Brumfit and Carter (1986), for my higher students I composed a lesson looking closely at Bruce Springsteen’s song *Streets of Philadelphia* (1994), which is about AIDS without ever mentioning it. Again, the lyrics are available on the CD cover.

After warm-up, pre-and while-listening/reading and specific vocabulary activities, I pointed out certain lines in the song and asked them what they said about the narrator’s emotional and physical condition? Next on

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the worksheet I quoted the lines.

*At night I could hear the blood in my veins,
Just as black and whispering as the rain*

and asked what the narrator compares his blood to. Other questions which followed, included: Which two words does the narrator use to describe his 'blood' and 'the rain'? What do these words mean to you? Try to define them. Why does the narrator use these words? And why does he compare his blood with rain? Why do you think the friends whose voices the narrator heard are "vanished and gone"? The final task in class asked the students to:

Put a **X** on these scales to show what you think about the song's narrator:

The man is-

healthy-----ill
happy-----sad
fat-----thin
old-----young
with his friends-----alone and lonely

(Then there followed an extension writing task.)

3. Dialogues from Film and Television Drama.

3.1 A Scene from a TV Play.

Tannen (1984) suggests an understanding of coherence in conversation "may grow out of an analysis of conversation in the spirit and tradition that has hitherto been applied to literary language"(p.153). She says that in regard to rhythm, surface linguistic features and contextualization, "conversation can be seen to exhibit features that have been

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identified as quintessentially literary”(p.154).

Good playwrights can capture the feel of authentic discourse and yet often present it in a way which is usually more eloquent, more “idealized” than truly authentic discourse. However, it is usually more natural than dialogues in textbooks, making it an excellent model for learners to observe and perhaps aim for. In addition, it is potentially useful for teaching because, as Tannen (1984) points out,

(L)iterary language makes increased and artful use of features that are spontaneous in face-to-face conversation because both rely for their effect on processes of subjective knowing, that is, speaker/writer-audience involvement. (p.158)

I transcribed a scene in “Blunt”, a play by English playwright Alan Bennett about the aristocrat who spied for the Soviet Union. Here is part of it:

Blunt arrives at a house in the suburbs, and rings the front door bell.

Chubb answers it.

Chubb: Well done, come in.

Blunt: One hopes this isn’t going to be the form, contracting me at work. Your predecessor was more discreet.

C: (laughs). Yes, so I understand. Anyway, you found us, that’s the important thing. Do you know Purley?

B: No.

C: It’s changed. Well, tea? Coffee? Or I might be able to track down a sherry.

B: No thank you.

C: Have we ever met before?

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B: No.

C: No, I didn't think so. Well, I'm sorry to drag you down here, but I thought we'd better get acquainted. There's no sense in putting off the evil day, as it were. We're not in here, actually.

At the beginning of this short extract, we can look at the dialogue with reference to adjacency pairs (see McCarthy, 1991, pp.119-22). Chubb's first words are congratulatory and welcoming, they're phatic. One would normally expect something like "thank you" to be the first words of someone entering the house and responding to "Well done, come in." Instead Blunt gets straight to the point, letting his irritation known, even though his choice of words and grammar, – his *style* – is very polite, even precious. Despite that, what he says at that time jars the ear of a native speaker and would also be interesting for language learners to consider. Compare this with Chubb's 'nice guy' act. He helps maintain this by using certain cohesive expressions, such as those explored by Halliday and Hasan (1976). For example, Chubb says "*Anyway*, you found...", "*Well*, tea?...", "...in here, *actually*". We could study this discourse in a language classroom to show the importance of these cohesion words in creating a certain, probably positive, impression.

3.2 Dialogue from a Film: Repetition.

Tannen (1989) shows how pervasive and important repetition in conversation is, one effect being that, in McCarthy's and Carter's words, it "signals rapport between speakers who use repetition actively to create interpersonal involvement" (p.146). Another benefit, says Tannen (1989), is that it "enables a speaker to produce language in a more efficient, less energy-draining way. It facilitates the production of more language, more fluently (p.48). Anything which can help learners of another language

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produce more of it more fluently should be looked at enthusiastically. It is interesting to note that one of America's foremost teachers of acting, — Sanford Meisner (1987) — gets his students to produce repetition of each other's words in *ping-pong* style to start improvised dialogues as a base for acting instinctively and creatively.

A recent example of a scene of a film containing a natural amount of repetition comes from *Pulp Fiction* by Quentin Tarantino (1994, pp. 14-16):

VINCENT

.....you know what the funniest thing about Europe is?

JULES

What?

VINCENT

It's the little differences. I mean, they got the same shit over there that we got here, but it's just, just, there it's a little different.

JULES

Example?

VINCENT

Well, you can walk into a movie theater and buy a beer. And I don't mean just, like, in no paper cup. I'm talking about a glass of beer. And in Paris, you can buy a beer at McDonald's. And, *you know what they call a Quarter-Pounder with Cheese in Paris?*

JULES

They don't call it a Quarter-Pounder with Cheese?

VINCENT

No, man, they got the metric system there, they wouldn't know what the fuck a *Quarter-Pounder* is.

JULES

What do *they* call it?

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VINCENT

They call it a Royale with Cheese.

JULES

(repeating)

Royale with Cheese.

VINCENT

Yeah, that's right.

JULES

What'd they call a *Big Mac*?

VINCENT

Well, *Big Mac's a Big Mac, but they call it Le Big Mac.*

JULES

Le Big Mac. What do they call a Whopper?

VINCENT

I dunno, I didn't go into a Burger King.

I have italicized parts of the dialogue which could be highlighted for showing how rapport between the speakers is helped by repetition. There are also examples of the typically dialogic discourse strategy beginning "you know what....?". It involves the listener and the negative answer gives the speaker the go-ahead to proceed with the story. This could be contrasted with another kind of text, such as an advertisement, which also used the technique, and a monologic text without this feature.

5. Conclusion.

There are many aspects of language awareness and language as discourse which I have not covered, but the possibilities are endless. There surely can be no doubt that the subject is a fascinating one to study *per se*. It is surely time to equip language learners with the tools to

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